

## Review of *Elite Capture: How the Powerful Took Over Identity Politics (And Everything Else)* by Olúfẹ̀mi O. Táíwò (Haymarket Books / Pluto Press)

by [Hunter Hilinski](#) | [Issue 12.1 \(Spring 2023\)](#), [Book Reviews](#)

**ABSTRACT** The discourse surrounding identity politics has become fraught with misunderstanding and co-optation by forces across the political spectrum. What was once a radical discourse initiated by the queer, Black, and Indigenous feminists of the Combahee River Collective has become a movement defined by incapacity, stigmatization, and misinterpretation. Olúfẹ̀mi O. Táíwò sets out to clarify the nature of the identity politics movement and its relationship to the powerful institutions and individuals which have misappropriated the original radicalism of this idea to serve their own political gains. Through a materialist and narrative approach to identity politics and social critique, Táíwò argues that the problem is not with identity politics as such, but a specific power called “elite capture,” which stifles the potential latent in identity politics and genuine leftist social organizing. He concludes that, rather than deferring responsibility and accepting symbolic gestures of empty representation, we must begin to construct a new politics and a new house altogether.

**KEYWORDS** [capitalism](#), [activism](#), [democracy](#), [organizing](#), [materialism](#), [identity politics](#), [elites](#)

*Elite Capture: How the Powerful Took Over Identity Politics (And Everything Else)* By Olúfẹ̀mi O. Táíwò. Chicago, IL: Haymarket Books, 2022. 168 pp. (paperback) ISBN 978-1-642596-88-5. US List: \$16.95.

The social fabric of modern democracy is characterized much more by cracks and divisions than by unities and triumphs. Indeed, one could easily argue that given the dark colonial history of Western democracy, this has always been the case. The age of social media, however, has accelerated the perceived sectarianism of contemporary social life, creating convenient echo chambers and fragmenting collectivities—a phenomenon which plays directly into the hands of a devout partisan media elite. The buzzword surrounding much of this discourse, conveniently placed onto the agenda of most liberal political positions by their conservative counterparts, is the term *identity politics*. Although the

tenor of these debates have taken on a near-conspiratorial and warped, immaterial air, their material effects are in fact quite significant.

In his much-anticipated book, *Elite Capture: How the Powerful Took Over Identity Politics (And Everything Else)*, philosopher Olúfẹ́mi O. Táíwò provides a freshly nuanced and materialist perspective to the discourse surrounding identity politics and leftist social organizing. Táíwò makes two central claims in his book. The first is about a social and political phenomenon, borrowed from the sphere of international aid, that Táíwò calls “elite capture.” In its most abstract form, elite capture refers to “a kind of system of behavior—a phenomenon articulated at the population level, an observable pattern of actions involving individuals, groups, and subgroups” (10). More concretely, Táíwò says, referencing economist Diya Dutta, elite capture deals with the unequal access to power across much of society and consequently the inability to redistribute this power and these resources appropriately (23). Táíwò defines the term “elite” relationally and historically, describing it as existing “in a particular context, between a smaller group of people and a larger group of people” (22). Elite capture is a specific moment meant to illustrate how “political projects can be hijacked—in principle or in effect—by the well positioned and better resourced” (23). Táíwò’s definition encompasses both the structures dictating the allocation of material goods *and* the system of cultural, ideological, and interpersonal relations these structures go on to produce. These include the university, liberal democratic institutions, social movements, “keyboard warriors,” and so on. Accordingly, “almost everything in our social world has a tendency to fall prey to elite capture” (21).

The second argument made by Táíwò is a critique of “deference politics,” a prime example of which is the call to “listen to the most affected” or “center the most marginalized” (69). This strategy is especially ubiquitous in the circles of liberal academia and leftist social activism. Táíwò, it should be noted, is not opposed to the necessity of uplifting the voices of the marginalized and socially maligned, but he seeks to show how this approach has been captured by elites and transformed into something ultimately self-congratulating, self-sabotaging, and destructively passive. The theme of the book’s main argumentative chapters “Reading the Room,” “Being in the Room,” and “Building a New House,” builds on the metaphor of “rooms” as the socially and historically imposed spaces we actively occupy. In organizing, he argues, we should not only be concerned with the control we exercise inside the rooms themselves—either communicatively by “passing the mic” or performatively by momentarily “stepping back”—but also with a necessary “external strategy” which lies outside any given room or set of interpersonal relationships (74). The deferential strategy allows for the redistribution of short-term attention, for example when the white person passes the mic to the person of color in the room, but this short-term gratification can mask the essential power relations by obscuring the overall power

dynamics of the room and the whole room's relationship to the category of "people of color" more broadly. (75).

As opposed to the former, deferential strategy, which sheds personal responsibility and falls victim to *symbolic* short-term gestures now appropriated by liberal politics, Táíwò prioritizes the latter, external strategy, and frames this as a type of "constructive politics." Deference politics absolves its adherents of responsibility, which creates fertile conditions for "virtue hoarding" on the left, and for the blurring of potentially radical discourses (as identity politics originally was, dating back to the Combahee River Collective's 1977 manifesto) by the forces of white supremacy on the right. Failing to embrace the necessity of this external strategy leaves movements vulnerable to two distinct strategies employed by elite forces: (a) symbolic identity politics and (b) the rebranding (not replacing) of existing institutions. Examples of the first trend can be found in the brutal tactics employed by police against Washington, D.C. Black Lives Matter protestors on a street painted "Black Lives Matter" by the mayor in 2020; the "Humans of CIA" recruitment ads which targeted multiple minority, queer, and Indigenous groups; or Nancy Pelosi and her fellow democrats kneeling while draped in scarves with Ghanaian *kente* designs following the death of George Floyd.<sup>1</sup> All three events merely clothe the actions of brutality with the language of progressive identity, seeking only to reinforce power through symbols and disregarding the material reality of their inherent violence. These contradictions point, in many ways, to the negation of difference once central to the radical power of identity politics.

As I stated above, Táíwò views navigation within the rooms as a still necessary task of good political organizing, acknowledging that identity politics has "equipped people, organizations, and institutions with a new vocabulary to describe their politics and aesthetic" (9). His creative weaving of leftist scholar activists like E. Franklin Frazier, Carter Godwin Woodson, Amílcar Cabral, and Paulo Freire illustrates the robust yet often hidden narratives still seeking light in these social spaces we traverse and recreate. Rather than allowing us to simply occupy new spaces within the room, however, Táíwò and the above authors represent a genuine call to the outside, toward horizons of collectivity informed by the past and the present. One might notice that there are moments in the book where these weaving narratives clash or become too enmeshed, but overall this narrative device proves to be one of the more powerful streams of the book's consciousness, embodying the potentials still latent in the room while generating a call to an outside beyond the symbolic or socially integrated. This motive is pushed ever further by the at-times conversational (though never unserious) manner of the book's cadence. In a style akin to the socio-poetic works of thinkers like Fred Moten and Stefano Harney, Táíwò embraces the possibilities of the text as its own type of social space. An activity capable of both displaying social contradictions while simultaneously generating a poetic call for political action. Look, for example, at the similarities between the quotes below, the first taken from

*Elite Capture*, and the second from an interview in the last chapter of Moten and Harney's *The Undercommons*.

**Táíwò:** "What about right now? How did you and I get here, interacting across this page? I could, after all, like many other people in the world, have simply read and thought about all these issues on my own. I could even have spoken to my friends and colleagues about them. But that would not give me the power to speak to *you*." (62).

**Moten and Harney:** "Recognizing that text is intertext is one thing. *Seeing that text as a social space is another...*terms are important insofar as they allow you, or invite you, or propel you, or require you, to enter that social space. But once you enter that social space, terms are just a part of it. There are things to do, places to go, and people to see in reading and writing – and it's about maybe even trying to figure out some kind of ethically responsible way to be in that world with other things."<sup>2</sup>

This socio-poetic sociality, I believe, lends itself to the final remarks on culture that Táíwò makes in the book—a culture that would ally the building of a new house from the localized anticapitalist struggles of organized and revolutionary social groups. Thus, the narrative approach of Táíwò's, while receiving criticism from orthodox Marxists for eschewing the more traditional Marxist terminology of production and accumulation, still suggests a deep materialism. As Táíwò writes in response to a critical review of the book by John-Baptiste Oduor, who argues Táíwò encourages a conclusion that the bad choices of individuals are wholly to blame for our condition, "*Elite Capture's* most central idea" is that elite capture is not a conspiracy, it is much bigger than the moral successes or failures of an individual or group.<sup>3</sup> Overcoming the conspiratorial glare generated by the co-optation of identity politics is central to recapturing its radical potential.

As with any theoretical analysis, we are left to wonder about the prospects for genuine actualization. There are few texts, if any, which have ever succeeded in realizing this disparity between the theoretical and the active. What's more, given Táíwò's specific focus on identity politics, one can be sure that there is more ground work to be done on clarifying the nature of elite capture in all realms of our social, political, and economic lives before the work of actualization can get off the ground. In short, we must continue to understand the *everything else* alluded to in the book's title before a critique of elite capture can be expressed in its entirety. However, in a moment defined by the incapacitation of critical thought and the lack of practical political alternatives which move beyond the existing and into the possible, Táíwò's contribution proves invaluable and timely.

## Notes

1. "Why were US Democrats wearing Ghana's kente cloth?" *BBC News*, June 9, 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-52978780> < <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-52978780>> . ↩

2. Fred Moten and Stefano Harney, *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning and Black Study* (New York: Minor Compositions, 2013), 108. ↩
  3. "Is It Worth It? A Conversation with Olúfẹ́mi O. Táíwò and John Baptiste-Oduor," *Jacobin*, July 10, 2022, <https://jacobin.com/2022/07/elite-capture-review-response> <  
<https://jacobin.com/2022/07/elite-capture-review-response/>> . ↩
- 

## Author Information

### Hunter Hilinski

Hunter Hilinski is a PhD student in political science at the University of California, Irvine. He holds bachelor's degrees in political science and philosophy from Wilkes University, and a master's degree in political science from Colorado State University. His research focuses are in German political thought, the critical theory of the Frankfurt School, race and ethnic politics, psychoanalysis, and environmental studies. Currently, he is writing on the Utopian materialism of Ernst Bloch and tracing the colonial history of coffee to modern myth making. He is also a proud UAW (United Auto Workers) union organizer and an avid football (soccer) fan.

[View all of Hunter Hilinski's articles.](#)

### Article details

Hunter Hilinski, "Review of *Elite Capture: How the Powerful Took Over Identity Politics (And Everything Else)* by Olúfẹ́mi O. Táíwò (Haymarket Books / Pluto Press)," *Lateral* 12.1 (2023).

<https://doi.org/10.25158/L12.1.21>

This article is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License](#). Copyright is retained by authors.

---

*Lateral* is the peer-reviewed, open access journal of the [Cultural Studies Association](#).

ISSN 2469-4053